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Long Journey Into Darkness

By Teresa Carpenter

THERE IS NO denying what Dennis Sweeney did. He walked out of a sleetstorm last March into the Associated Press Building in Rockefeller Plaza, took the elevator to the ninth floor and, within 20 minutes of entering the law office of Layton & Sherman, shot Allard Lowenstein dead with a Spanish pistol.

Precisely what happened during those 20 minutes is unclear. But a few things are known. Sweeney complained that Lowenstein was tormenting him with voices. Lowenstein had heard about these voices before. He knew that Sweeney, a former protegé from the civil rights era, hated him. He knew that Sweeney was paranoid and convinced some mysterious forces were trying to kill him. Lowenstein tried to reason.

"You're sick, Dennis," he said. "You need a psychiatrist."

It was a fatal miscalculation. Sweeney pulled the pistol and fired seven shots. Five struck Lowenstein in the chest, stomach and left elbow. Sweeney then walked to the anteroom, placed the gun on a desk, sat down and calmly smoked a hand-rolled tobacco cigarette. He did not try to run. In the wake of panic and weeping that followed, Sweeney conducted himself with an eerie dignity. And while the great and near-great prepared eulogies to Lowenstein—former congressman, civil rights activist, nemesis of Lyndon Baines Johnson—Sweeney was led away to Bellevue like a sleepwalker.

During the weeks that followed, people who had known the two men as friends wracked their memories for some foreshadowing. Nearly everyone who was close to Sweeney at some time over the past 20 years had heard that he had grown reclusive and strange, haunted by voices and disembodied tormentors. The Sweeney they recalled was a perennial youth, endowed, in retrospect, with nearly mythic qualities of bravery and idealism. They could not imagine how he could have been so broken along the way, been so transformed by the years, as to arrive at Lowenstein's office one afternoon carrying a loaded pistol.

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There may be no single reason why Sweeney's behavior changed so radically. One pat rationale offered by people who knew him little or not at all is that the violence of Mississippi provoked his delusions, but it's more likely that the void following the violence was his undoing.

Field now suggests the sickness was like a virus that lay in his brain until isolation and desperation gave it the culture in which to grow. By the time he and Field separated, Sweeney's paranoia had been incubating for many years. Shards of suspicion which had accumulated in his mind derived from circumstances that were commonplace during the '60s. Everyone in McComb knew that he or she had an FBI file. Everyone at the Peace and Liberation Commune knew that the phones were being tapped. An FBI man even visited one day and was sitting in the front room when Harris got out of the shower. Most members of the Resistance dealt with this ubiquitous presence one of two ways: by considering surveillance a badge of honor, or a joke. Sweeney, however, internalized the threat. Surveillance became a sinister thing. He took it very personally. Once an FBI agent called his mother just to say he was keeping an eye on her son.

Lowenstein, it was rumored, also had ties to the CIA. As far back as 1964 stories circulated through SNCC that he was actually an agent. No one had any proof of this, but in those days anyone using as many airplane tickets as Lowenstein did was marked for suspicion. None of the New Left was really shocked in 1967 when "Ramparts" reported that the CIA had been setting the international agenda of the National Student Association since 1952, one year after Lowenstein stepped down as president.

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Lowenstein denied any involvement. What matters is not so much whether he was implicated, but that Sweeney felt he was. Once when Gage took note of a copy of Lowenstein's "Brutal Mandate" lying on Sweeney's desk, Sweeney shook his head in his characteristically understated way and said he thought Lowenstein had too many CIA ties.

The old Resistance crowd first caught an inkling that something was strange with Sweeney when he and Field arrived by motorcycle from the East. Sweeney got it into his head that his old friend Gage had assaulted Connie. Everyone knew that was absurd. After the split with Field, Sweeney began drifting once more. With Harris in jail, the little Resistance group began disintegrating and Sweeney became lost in the general dissolution. He took odd jobs, drove a hack, carried mail. He moved back to Portland around 1972 and gradually cut himself off from his friends. The voices began to make their subtle, insidious intrusion into his head.

Sweeney began to believe his mind was being read. He would turn on the television and be startled to find his thoughts broadcast on the evening news. He began receiving transmissions of voices, some of which he recognized, some of which he didn't. At first, Lowenstein's was not among them. During that early period of his sickness, Sweeney even visited Lowenstein and complained of some hostile third party that was monitoring his mind.

The transmission persisted, and in his frantic anxiety to stop them he began checking his body for hardware. He recalled the encounter with Lowenstein in Palo Alto and the words: "You are at the center of things now, Dennis. I am not." He became convinced Lowenstein was taunting him; that he *knew* about the surveillance. Sweeney even entertained the delusion that Lowenstein and whatever insidious agents he controlled had ordered the dentist who repaired his teeth to install a radio receiver in the bridgework. Sweeney tore the dental work out of his mouth. But the torment persisted.

Perhaps the culprit was an electrode in his brain. He confided this to his mother who, terrified that he might try to cut into his scalp, took him to a psychiatric hospital for observation. She tried to have him involuntarily committed, but the courts refused.

In March 1973, he wrote Leni Wildflower and Paul Potter of SDS that he was working as a dishwasher and planning to finish his last year of college at Portland State. "I'm at the lowest ebb of my life," he wrote, "because of the psychological warfare that is being made on me since about two years ago . . I am fairly certain that I have software that I wasn't born with. I have done everthing I can do to locate it and remove it. My efforts have all been failures and usually self-destructive. No doubt in the '60s I was party to some behavior that was politically irresponsible. If that incurred a social debt, then I am willing to pay it in reasonable terms (rather than endure) the bureaucratic sadism and infinite guilt which is what I see confronting me."

He was considering, he said, moving to another country, someplace that might be more tolerant of a radical philosophy. But he dreaded the idea of starting over in a new culture at the age of 30. Wildflower and Potter wrote back, urging him to come live with them in San Jose, but he never responded. Instead, he traveled in search of medical help. Not psychotherapy, but surgery. He was looking for a doctor who could remove the electrode. For a time he was an outpatient in a private clinic in Connecticut, but he left after doctors refused to open his skull. He went to France, where he thought he might find a sympathetic surgeon, but was back within a month. He drifted and lived alone. The voices had destroyed his sexual desire. Sometimes they were benign. His mother, for instance, would come over the waves telling him, "I'm out here in Portland thinking of you." Others were more sinister. Agents of the CIA or FBI would say they were out to kill him. Sometimes they would call him "coward."

During the winter of 1975, Sweeney lived alone in an apartment in Philadelphia. The voices he heard most persistently were those of Lowenstein and Pincus. Perhaps, he thought, if he appealed directly to his tormentors they would stop. He called Lowenstein in New York. Lowenstein later told a friend that he had met Sweeney at Penn Station in Philadelphia. The encounter occurred late one night. Lowenstein entered the deserted waiting area and at first mistook the gaunt and haggard figure who stepped out to meet him for a derelict. Call off your agents, Sweeney said. Get out of my life. At that moment, Lowenstein recalled, Sweeney seemed more threatened than threatening.

Lowenstein was genuinely bewildered. "Why," he would ask friends later, "does Dennis hate me so much?" To the end he probably never understood the sad, disturbed boy behind the protégé. More likely, his ego felt pangs from a discipleship gone sour. He thought Sweeney could somehow be made to see reason.

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